



Student Counseling Center Structure and Organization

At Selective, Public Research Universities



Student Affairs Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Institutions maintain a tiered personnel structure within counseling centers to provide opportunities for promotion and professional development. Associate directors and assistant directors provide administrative support to directors and supervise line clinical staff. Coordinators lead working groups in clinical specialties (e.g., substance abuse, sexual assault, eating disorders). Contacts strive to create transparent pathways for exceptional clinicians to advance into coordinator roles and onward to assistant director positions. In addition, directors provide opportunities for promotion to internal staff to supplement a dearth of qualified external candidates for leadership positions.

Clinical coordinator positions build administrative skills in clinical staff and serve as internal pipelines for senior administrative openings. Coordinators typically serve as content experts and administer consultation groups for clinical staff that build content knowledge and troubleshoot cases. Contacts report difficulty identifying quality candidates for leadership positions with the necessary combination of clinical and administrative experience. Coordinator positions offer clinical staff opportunities to hone management and oversight skills while building expertise in a given topic (e.g., alcohol abuse, affective disorders).

Institutions design strategies such as case reviews and clinical intern programs to address increasing demand for counseling services with limited resources. Contacts report demographic changes of incoming students require increases in counseling and psychological services. Counseling centers maintain protocols for case evaluations based on severity of student need; referral specialists (e.g., a staff liaison to local hospitals, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists) locate appropriate resources off-campus for the most severe cases. Staff members encourage students to seek counseling resources in the community, contingent on their insurance benefits and coverage.

Long-term strategic needs inform hiring of clinical staff by counseling center directors. Large numbers of applicants for clinical positions simplify the hiring process for counseling directors, although hiring has become more competitive across all positions in recent years. Counseling centers must compete with high-salary positions at private practices and with government agencies (e. g., Veterans Affairs hospitals). However, counseling directors promote the academic calendar schedule (i.e., lower workloads during the holidays and summer) and job stability at universities as attractive compared to the volatility of the private job market.

Size of clinical counseling staff varies according to the composition of the student body and the reputation of the counseling service. Counseling directors encounter the paradox of seeking to improve the reputation of their service, which in turn attracts more students to seek out institutional support rather than from private clinicians. In addition, more selective universities see increasingly large proportions of students who seek counseling from institutional services.

2) Structure and Staffing

Organization and Leadership

The primary responsibilities of the counseling center director are:

- manage the leadership team (i.e., assistant directors, associate directors)
- formulate strategy
- manage annual budget
- hire and evaluate staff
- liaise with external university offices

Provide Counseling Centers Operating Autonomy within Institutional Reporting Structures

Institutions grant counseling centers significant independence to operate at the discretion of the director. The majority of profiled institutions house counseling centers within student affairs or the student health services. At the **University of California – Berkeley**, however, the counseling center reports upwards through business and administrative services, which also manages the pharmacy and student health insurance. Institutions grant counseling center directors autonomy to shape the clinical staff and decide on the proper allocation of resources.

Empower Counseling Center Directors to Hire Senior Staff that Complement the Leadership Team

Counseling center directors design leadership positions to provide oversight and administrative capacity to the leadership team. Contacts report serving increasingly larger proportions of students every year, and as a result staff size has grown too large for the director to individually supervise all clinical staff. Associate and assistant directors supervise clinical staff, run clinical specialties, and manage collaborations with other campus offices and organizations. At institutions that employ both associate and assistant directors, little difference in responsibilities exist; the associate director is simply more senior. At **Purdue University**, the director is supported by three assistant directors, each with an administrative focus (i.e., training, technology/data management, clinical services). The Assistant Director of Training oversees clinical interns and practicum students. The Assistant Director of Clinical Services collaborates with the Director to provide supervision and clinical oversight.

Sample Qualifications and Responsibilities of the Assistant Director



Assistant Director

Qualifications

- Five years of clinical experience in college or university counseling center
- Experience in administration or management of clinical specialty areas (e.g., sexual assault, substance abuse, multicultural issues)
- Possession of doctorate in clinical/applied psychology or master of social work or master of counseling
- Possession of state clinical practice license
- Some supervisory experience preferred

Responsibilities

- Provide up to 20 hours per week of clinical service in area of expertise
- Lead training program for pre-doctoral interns and practicum students
- Provide coaching and feedback to trainees following clinical sessions
- Provide oversight to clinical staff
- Evaluate staff effectiveness and monitor student usage trends
- Assist Director in formulating long-term strategy

Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Create Clinical Coordinator Positions to Build Administrative Skills in Line Staff

Profiled institutions maintain clinical coordinator positions to provide robust oversight and leadership to clinical specialties. These positions serve as stretch roles for clinical staff, who receive increased responsibilities, although they perform a lightened clinical role. At **North Carolina State University**, clinical coordinators build skills necessary for future leadership within counseling centers. Clinical staff members that show potential for leadership manage a clinical specialty (e.g., substance abuse, campus outreach, crisis psychological assessment) and coordinate resources and training for clinical staff within that specialty area.

Coordinators also manage student resources tied to the counseling center. At the **University of California – Berkeley**, a coordinator oversees a crisis response hotline and liaises with local hospitals and police.

Clinical Staff Career Path at Texas A&M University



Maintain a Robust Staff with a Variety of Clinical Specialties for a Full-Service Counseling Center

Center directors recruit staff with a wide array of specialties to ensure that counseling services meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Psychologists formerly dominated counseling centers at universities; nowadays, directors maintain positions for psychiatrists, social workers, and licensed counselors as well. In addition, directors fill positions with candidates that complement or augment certain clinical specialties.

An appropriate staff ratio provides one clinician per 1,500 students, according to contacts at **Purdue University**. Directors ensure through hiring practices that the counseling service can provide services in any specialty area (e.g., substance abuse, domestic abuse, multicultural concerns).

3) Staff Development and Advancement

Identification of Candidates

Open Dialogue with Clinical Staff to Determine Interest in Future Leadership Positions

Opportunities for promotion into leadership positions appeal to some clinical staff. Contacts build dialogue about upcoming opportunities through both formal review processes and informal conversations. Contacts report this dialogue is an ongoing process of identifying interested staff, as promotion to a primarily administrative role may not appeal to all clinical staff. At **North Carolina State University**, transparency defines the hiring and promotion process. When leadership vacancies arise, the director leverages openings as a motivational tool for clinical staff as part of a continual development process. Internal promotions serve as a boost to office morale and engagement.

Design Criteria to Measure Clinical and Leadership Skills that Match the Center's Needs

Directors maintain a variety of criteria to evaluate clinical staff for potential leadership positions. Excellent clinical capabilities (e.g., relationships with students, diagnostic skills) top the list of requirements. In addition, contacts examine the administrative and leadership potential of candidates. Institutions that maintain clinical coordinator positions retain staff members with the appropriate combination of clinical and administrative skills (e.g., running meetings, troubleshooting cases, locating resources) needed for assistant director positions.



Staff Evaluation and Development at the *University of California – Berkeley*

Contacts evaluate clinical staff through student satisfaction surveys and comprehensive case reviews with peers. Contacts encourage clinical staff to complete courses in management and organizational leadership as preparation for future opportunities within the counseling center. Former clinical staff comprise the majority of senior staff in the counseling center.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruit Staff for Clinical Skills and Future Leadership Potential

Profiled institutions hire the majority of staff for entry-level clinical positions. Contacts fill leadership vacancies with internal candidates who boast local knowledge of staff and student populations. In addition, contacts report a dearth of qualified external candidates who often lack the administrative experience or familiarity with internal processes. As a result, directors evaluate even entry-level candidates for leadership potential.

In contrast to difficulty filling leadership positions, contacts report high numbers of applicants for clinical positions. At the **University of California – Los Angeles**, the counseling center receives hundreds of applications for every open clinical position.

Ratio calculated as student population divided by total clinicians (clinical staff and associate/assistant directors, who typically serve clinical duties as well).

Counseling Center Staff Size and Ratios

Institution	Associate/ Assistant Directors	Clinical Staff*	Ratio of Clinicians-to- Students
University of California – Los Angeles	5	60	1 to 631
University of California – Berkeley	6	35	1 to 878
North Carolina State University	4	28	1 to 1,063
Purdue University	3	25	1 to 1,429
Texas A&M University	4	30	1 to 1,647

* Clinical staff encompasses all psychologists, psychiatrists, licensed counselors, and social workers employed more than 20 hours per week. There are no available figures for exclusively FTEs.

Offer Flexible Working Schedules for Clinical Staff to Compensate for Comparatively Modest Pay

Contacts design strategies to address retention of clinical staff. Clinicians earn higher salaries working in private practice or in government agencies, so counseling center directors promote the academic calendar and a collegial work atmosphere as attractive qualities. In particular, psychiatrists earn upwards of \$100,000 per year outside academic settings. To maintain psychiatrists on staff at an affordable cost, contacts at the **University of California – Berkeley** offer flexible schedules; psychiatrists on staff work part-time and augment salary through private practice.

Institutional human resource policies also influence the ability of counseling centers to retain clinical staff. At **Purdue University**, internal hires for leadership positions are paid less than external hires. This creates an incentive for clinical staff to leave should they desire career advancement.

4) Case Management

Student Population

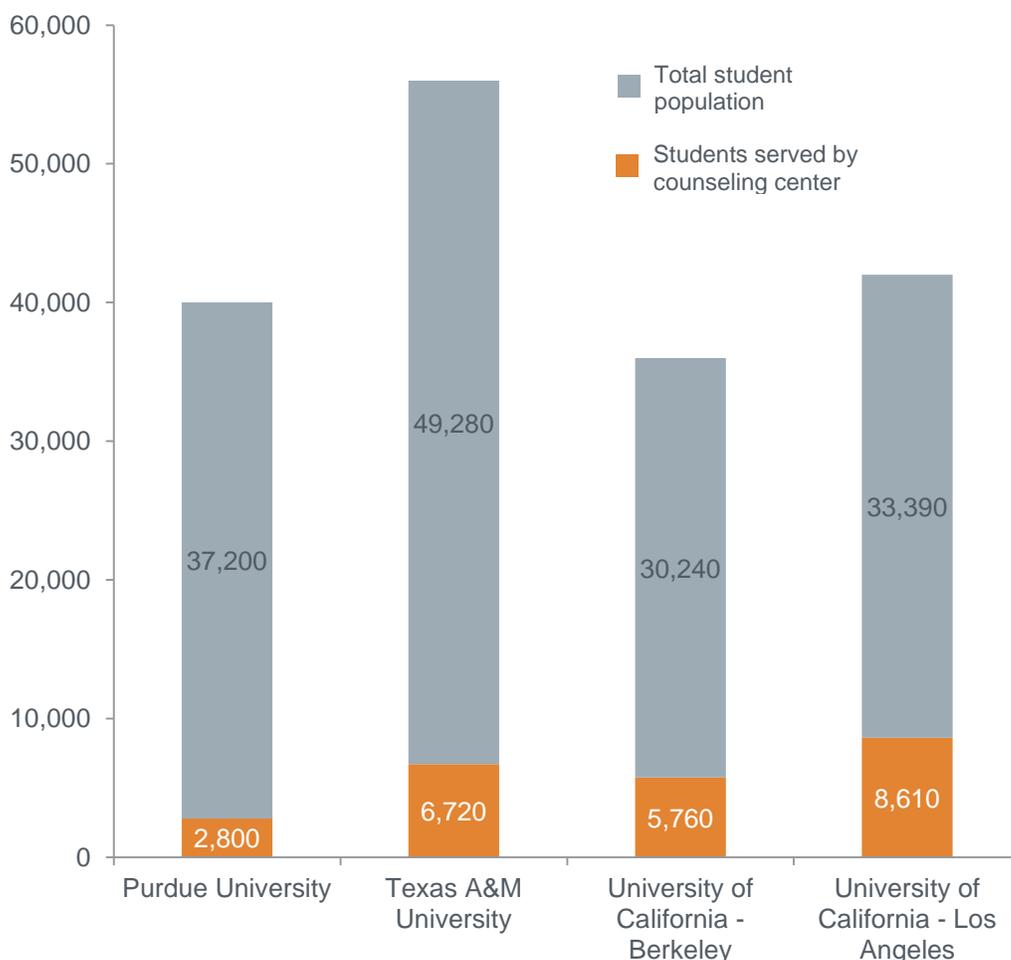
Design Strategies that Maintain Flexibility for Counseling Center Staffing Resources to Meet Student Needs

Counseling centers maintain case review protocols to ensure that available resources match student demand. Profiled institutions endeavor to meet with any student within two to three weeks of initial contact. In cases where students require long-term counseling, center staff consult regularly to decide whether the student should be referred to a specialist clinician in the community. At **Texas A&M University**, a student that reaches 20 clinical session triggers an automatic case review, in which clinical staff discuss the merits of continued internal counseling or the possibility of referral for more specialized services. At the **University of California – Berkeley**, students receive five free counseling sessions; students then have an option to receive three more sessions for a small fee, after which they gain referral to a clinician in the local community.

Not all institutions adopt session limits. Contacts at the **University of California – Los Angeles** previously maintained a session limit, however a rigorous analysis of case data revealed that the majority of cases ended after a few sessions, and too much staff time was consumed by referral consultations for cases at the session limit. Now, there is no session limit, and clinical staff evaluate the appropriate number of sessions on a case-by-case basis.

Contacts at **North Carolina State University** did not provide information on the number of students served by the counseling center.

Students Served by Counseling Centers Relative to Student Population



Case Load

Ensure Clinical Staff Maintain a Schedule with Diverse Topic Areas and Patients

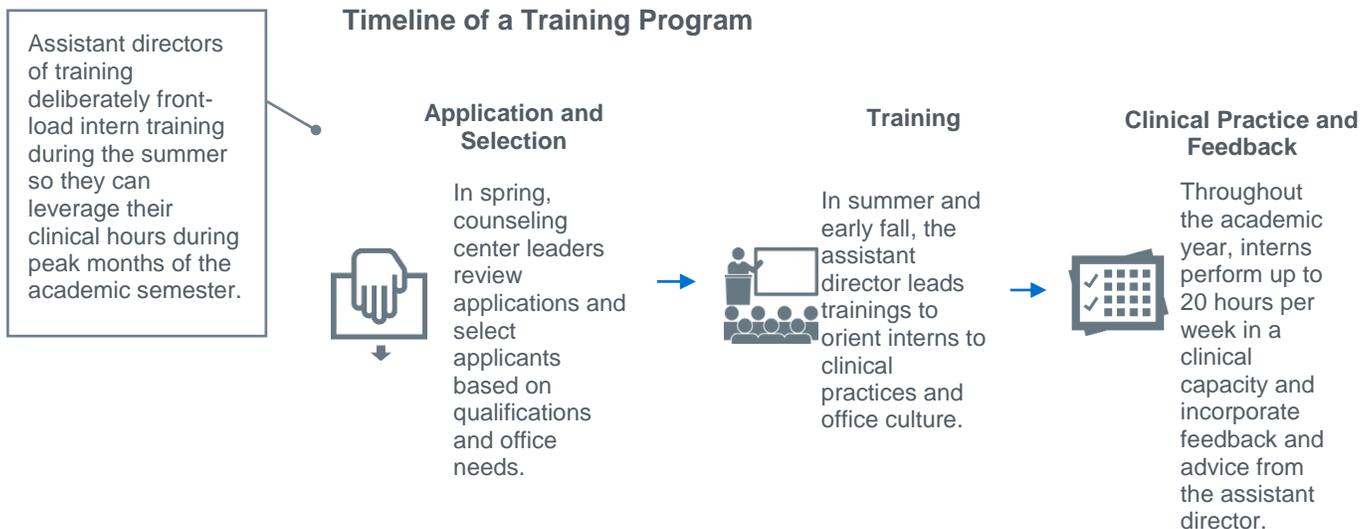
Intake processes provide each clinician with a broad portfolio of cases that encompass a spectrum of clinical specialties. Profiled institutions maintain a standard schedule and case load for full-time clinical staff that includes:

- 24 (up to 30) clinical hours per week
- 3-4 intakes/evaluations of new patients per week
- Weekly staff meetings
- Consultation groups
- Professional development (e.g., leading student groups, attending seminars)

Expand Training Programs to Provide Additional Clinical Capacity during Peak Periods

Profiled institutions maintain pre-doctoral internships, post-doctoral fellowships, and practicum programs; these programs serve as a pipeline for future clinical talent and enhance the clinical capabilities of the counseling service. At **North Carolina State University**, master's students in counseling provide up to 20 hours of supervised clinical work per week; this provides a net contribution of more than 100 clinical hours per week. Assistant or associate directors provide oversight and feedback to trainees as part of a designated training role.

The counseling center at the **University of California – Berkeley** leverages its reputation as a top-tier training program to attract large classes of interns, fellows, and practicum students; this allows the director to maintain a leaner staff while maintaining the capacity to serve a broad proportion of the student body.



5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- Where do institutions house counseling centers?
- What responsibilities do counseling center directors maintain?
- What staff roles exist within the center?
- What opportunities exist for counseling center employees to advance within the center?
- What are the retention rates for counselors at other institutions?
- How do directors recruit counselors from PhD programs and other settings?
- What proportion of students receives counseling services?
- How do supervisors manage the case-load of clinical staff?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- [EAB's internal and online research libraries](#)
- [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#)
- Institutional Websites:
 - [North Carolina State University Counseling Center](#)
 - [Purdue University Counseling and Psychological Services](#)
 - [Texas A&M University Student Counseling Service](#)
 - [University of California – Berkeley Counseling](#)
 - [University of California – Los Angeles Counseling and Psychological Services](#)

The Forum interviewed counseling center directors at highly selective, large, public research universities.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)	Classification
North Carolina State University	South (City, Large)	25,000/34,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Purdue University	Midwest (Suburb, Midsize)	30,000/40,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Texas A&M University	South (City, Small)	44,000/56,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University of California – Berkeley	Pacific West (City, Midsize)	26,000/36,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University of California – Los Angeles	Pacific West (City, Large)	29,000/41,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)

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